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ABSTRACT

Once students can identify main (independent) clauses and main ideas, a simple graphic system will demonstrate whether their sentences are strong and unified. The student underlines the main clause of a sentence and circles the main idea. In a strong, unified sentence, the circle will sit on the line. If the circle does not sit on the line, the writer should consider revising the sentence so that its main idea is in its main clause. A variety of exercises (with answer keys) serve to explain and reinforce the concept, including one in which an identical set of sentences yields two paragraphs that make quite different points. (Author/NKA)

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Using Grammatical Information to Make Rhetorical Points

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ABSTRACT

Theory: Once students can identify main (independent) clauses and main ideas, a simple graphic system will demonstrate whether their sentences are strong and unified. The student underlines the main clause of a sentence and circles the main idea. In a strong, unified sentence, the circle will sit on the line. If the circle does not sit on the line, the writer should consider revising the sentence so that its main idea is in its main clause.

Practice: The presentation includes a variety of exercises (with answer keys) to explain and reinforce the concept, including one in which an identical set of sentences yields two paragraphs that make quite different points.

MIMC? AN (ALMOST) INFALLIBLE TEST FOR SENTENCE UNITY IN A PARAGRAPH

Step 1: Distinguish between phrases and clauses.
Step 2: Distinguish between independent and dependent clauses.
Step 3: Underline the independent clause(s) of the sentence.
Step 4: Circle the main idea(s) in the sentence.
Step 5: Ask: Is each circle sitting on a line?

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Yes?...The sentence has sentence unity.
No?.....Rewrite the sentence so that the circle(s) will sit on the line(s) --
the main idea(s) will then be in the main clause(s), and there will usually be only one main clause.

MIMC? = IS THE MAIN IDEA IN THE MAIN CLAUSE?

MAIN IDEA: The main idea is the idea you want to emphasize in your sentence. In a paragraph, it should match the controlling idea of your topic sentence.

MAIN CLAUSE: The main clause is the independent clause of the sentence.

If you underline the main clause and draw a circle around the main idea, you'll be able to see whether or not your sentence is unified.

If the circle is sitting on the line, you have the main idea inside the main clause.
If the circle is not sitting on the line, you need to reconsider the sentence.

Look at EXERCISE ONE on the page to the right.

First, circle the main idea in the topic sentence.
Next, underline the main clause in (a) and (b) .
Next, circle in (a) and (b) the idea that matches the idea you circled in the topic sentence.
Now check the answer key at the bottom of the next page to be sure you did all this correctly.
Then check to see which sentence has a circle sitting on top of the line. THAT is the sentence you want.
Don't bury your main idea in a phrase, even if the phrase is a part of main clause.
Look at EXERCISE TWO on the page to the right.

Underline the main clauses; circle the controlling ideas.
(For both, you'll underline the entire sentence.
For (a), you'll circle "by its cleanliness"; for B, "Its cleanliness.")
Both sentences have the circle on the line, but which sentence makes "cleanliness" stand out?

EXERCISE ONE

Which of the support sentences below fits better with the topic sentence?

TOPIC SENTENCE: Even though Mom cooked in it all day long and fed our whole family

there three times a day, her kitchen always looked clean.

SUPPORT SENTENCES:
(a) All of the counter tops, which were made of white formica, sparkled when the sunlight hit them.
(b) All of the counter tops, which sparkled when the sunlight hit them, were made of formica.

EXERCISE TWO

TOPIC SENTENCE:
(a) I was always surprised by its cleanliness.
(b) Its cleanliness always surprised me.

-----ANSWER KEY-----

[Editor's Note: Items which were circled in the answer keys are here presented in bold type; underlined items are in italics]

EXERCISE ONE:
Even though Mom cooked in it all day long and fed our whole family there three times a day, **her kitchen always looked clean.**
(a) ***All of the counter tops,*** which were made of white formica, ***sparkled*** when the sunlight hit them.
(b) *All of the counter tops*, **which sparkled** when the sunlight hit them, *were made of formica.*

EXERCISE TWO: Sure, (b) does. In (a), "I was always surprised" can stand alone; the "cleanliness" idea gets buried.

MIMC? SAN FRANCISCO EXERCISE

Outlined below is a paragraph about San Francisco. The topic sentence and major supports are fine. You need to add some details, some minor supports.

From the minor supports listed, choose DETAILS that fit the controlling idea of the topic sentence and the major. (Feel free to underline the main clause and circle the main idea--doing so will help you decide which sentence(s) to use.)

TOPIC SENTENCE:
After only one morning of sight seeing there, we had one overwhelming impression: San Francisco is a very noisy place.

MAJOR SUPPORT #1:

I first noticed the noise while we were waiting for the cable car.

MINOR SUPPORTS: (Choose three):

(a) Standing in a crowd of excited tourists, we had to shout to make ourselves heard.

(b) The tourists, babbling loudly in several languages, waited patiently in line.

(c) The tourists, waiting patiently in line, babbled loudly in several languages.

(d) Street vendors shouted and sang to attract our attention.

(e) Street vendors attracted our attention by shouting and singing.

MAJOR SUPPORT #2:

The arrival of the cable car added several decibels of sound.

MINOR SUPPORTS (Choose the two best ones):

(f) Clanging its bell and sporting many fluttering flags, the empty cable car approached.

(g) The empty cable car that approached us, its bright flags fluttering, clanged its bell every few seconds.

(h) The harsh grinding of its brakes, which drowned out the babbling, had a metallic sound.

(i) The harsh, metallic grinding of its brakes drowned out the babbling.

(j) Deafened by the car's noise, we hardly noticed how crowded we were.

MAJOR SUPPORT #3:

As the car, filled to capacity, clattered down the hill, we were surrounded by a cacophony of sound.

MINOR SUPPORTS (Choose three):

(k) Local residents, who whistled and called to us cheerfully, welcomed us to their town.

(l) Local residents, who welcomed us to their town, whistled and called their greetings.

(m) The cable car driver, whose hands were busy with levers and chains, still sounded his bell to acknowledge each greeting.

(n) The cable car driver, who acknowledged their greetings with a variety of bell sounds, kept busy with the car's levers and chains.

(o) The car itself rattled and scraped as its chains and pulleys kept its speed under control.

(p) As the car's chains and pulleys rattled and scraped, they managed to keep the car under control.

CONCLUSION:

When we screeched to a halt at Fisherman's Wharf, I set out to make my first serious San Francisco purchase -- earplugs!

ANSWER KEY

If you chose a, c, d; g, i; and l, m, o, your paragraph will have unified sentences. It will look like this:

After only one morning of sight seeing there, we had one overwhelming impression: San Francisco is a very noisy place. I first noticed the noise while we were waiting for the cable car. Standing in a crowd of excited tourists, we had to shout to make ourselves heard. The tourists, waiting patiently in line, babbled loudly in several languages. Street vendors shouted and sang to attract our attention. The arrival of the cable car added several decibels of sound. The empty cable car that approached us, its bright flags fluttering, clanged its bell every few seconds. The harsh, metallic grinding of its brakes drowned out the babbling of the tourists. As the car, filled to capacity, clattered down the hill, we were surrounded by a cacophony of sound. Local residents, who welcomed us to their town, whistled and called their greetings. The cable car driver, whose hands were busy with levers and chains, still sounded the bell to acknowledge each greeting. The car itself rattled and scraped as its chains and pulleys kept its speed under control. When we screeched to a halt at Fisherman's Wharf, I set out to make my first serious San Francisco purchase -- ear plugs!

MIMC: One Set of Sentences Yields Two Paragraphs

Below are two topic sentences and seven compound sentences. Work with a partner, each taking a different topic sentence.

Then rewrite each compound sentence so that (1) it has only one main clause and (2) the idea that matches the controlling idea of your topic sentence is in that main clause. Put everything else in a dependent clause or a phrase.

You and your partner will produce two different paragraphs, each unified and developed. The first sentence has been done for you.

TOPIC SENTENCES:

A. In spite of her many problems, Alicia won the contest for Prom Queen.
B. Alicia, who won the contest for Prom Queen, had to overcome many problems.

SUPPORTING SENTENCES:

1. Her boyfriend, Ralph, had lots of influence as the captain of the football team, and he almost missed the deadline for nominating her.

2. All of his teammates promised to vote for Alicia, and most of them did; but some of them never got around to voting at all.

3. The basketball players originally supported one of Alicia's rivals; they eventually gave their votes to Alicia.

4. Alicia had trouble raising enough money for her campaign, so her sorority sisters came to her rescue.

5. Trudy was Alicia's campaign manager, and she did a terrific job; however, she came down with the flu halfway through the campaign.

6. The ballots were counted and re-counted; they clearly gave Alicia the title of Prom Queen.

7. Alicia experienced many trying times, and she finally became the new Queen.

A. In spite of many problems, Alicia won the contest for Prom Queen. (1) Her boyfriend Ralph, who almost missed the deadline for nominating her, had lots of influence as captain of the football team.

(2) _____
_____

(3) _____
_____

(4) _____
_____

(5) _____
_____

(6) _____
_____

(7) _____
_____

B: Alicia, who won the contest for Prom Queen, had to overcome many problems. (1) Her boyfriend, Ralph, who had lost of influence as captain of the football team, almost missed the deadline for nominating her.

(2) _____
_____

(3) _____
_____

(4) _____
_____

(5) _____
_____

(6) _____
_____

(7) _____
_____

ANSWER KEY

(NOTE: The paragraphs below are not finished! They still need some transitions and final editing, but all of the sentences are unified and support the controlling idea of the topic sentence.)

A. In spite of her many problems, Alicia won the contest for prom queen. Her boyfriend, Ralph, who almost missed the deadline for nominating her, had lots of influence as captain of the football team. All of his teammates promised to vote for her, and most of them did, although some of them never got around to voting at all. The basketball players, who originally supported one of Alicia's rivals, eventually gave Alicia their votes. When Alicia had trouble raising enough money for her campaign, her sorority sisters came to her rescue. Although Trudy, her campaign manager, came down with the flu halfway through campaign, she did a terrific job. The ballots, counted and recounted, clearly gave Alicia the title. After experiencing many trying times, Alicia became the new Prom Queen.

B. Alicia, who won the contest for Prom Queen, had to overcome many problems. Her boyfriend, Ralph, who had lots of influence as captain of the football team, almost missed the deadline for nominating her. Although all his teammates promised to vote for her, and most of them did, some of them never got around to voting at all. The basketball players, who eventually gave Alicia their votes, originally supported one of her rivals. Until her sorority sisters came to her rescue, Alicia had trouble raising enough money for her campaign. Trudy, who did a terrific job as campaign manager, came down with the flu halfway through the campaign. The ballots, clearly giving Alicia the title, had to be counted and re-counted. Before becoming the new Prom Queen, Alicia experienced many trying times.

_____

_____

MIMC: Editing a Paragraph for Sentence Unity*

Some sentences in the following paragraph are not unified. Revise the paragraph, including

the topic and clinching sentences, so that Michelangelo's hardships in painting the chapel ceiling are stressed. Do not discard any sentence completely.

Despite the many hardships that he encountered, Michelangelo painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Pope Julius II, a major source of difficulty, commissioned the work. He was impatient for the chapel to be finished, and he kept urging Michelangelo to work faster. He was not so willing to finance the project, and the artist often had to beg his patron for additional funds. Bramante was the Pope's chief architect, and he was a more serious problem. He was, in fact, Michelangelo's bitter enemy, and he often carried gossip to the Pope or suggested that the painting be abandoned. The artist's own family hindered his progress. He had a father and four brothers who continually wrote him letters asking for money. They took up his time with their quarrels. Assistants who would cooperate with him were something that Michelangelo could not find. His work was delayed many times because his helpers could not follow his directions. There were many technical problems that arose, and he was forced to solve most of them himself. As you can see, Michelangelo's life was difficult in many ways.

* My notes as to the origin of this paragraph have been lost; it probably came from an early edition of John Ostrom's *Better Paragraphs*.

ONE ACCEPTABLE REVISION OF THE MICHELANGELO PARAGRAPH

(NOTE: The paragraph below is not finished. It still needs some transitions and final editing, but all of the sentences are unified and support the controlling idea of the topic sentence.)

Michelangelo encountered many hardships while painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Pope Julius II, who commissioned the work, was a major source of difficulty. Impatient for the chapel to be finished, he kept urging Michelangelo to work faster. Since he was not so willing to finance the project, the artist often had to beg his patron for additional funds. Bramante, the Pope's chief architect, was a more serious problem. Michelangelo's bitter enemy, who often carried gossip to the Pope, Bramante suggested that the painting be abandoned. The artist's own family hindered his progress. His father and four brothers continually asked him for money in their letters. They took up his time with their quarrels. Michelangelo could not find cooperative assistants. His work was delayed many times because his helpers could not follow his directions. He was forced to solve most of the technical problems that arose himself. As you can see, painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was difficult for Michelangelo in many ways.